**Jim Gold’s Balkan Adventure Tour Critique**

Here is my take on your two-week Balkan Adventure Tour that Yvonne and I took. This was an ambitious tour. Seven countries if you count Macedonia and Bulgaria twice. A lot of bus time between places but a lot to see and do in the two weeks.

1. **Hotels: Grand Sofia Hotel (2) –** Tour started with a bang with this hotel having the largest rooms of the tour. Large panoramic windows, good beds and AC. Location was central and next to the National Theater.

**Skalite Hotel (2) –** **Belogradchik –** Best hotel in this town. Nicely designed two room suite with a large bath. Good AC and view of part of the “Rocks” from the windows.

**Marriott Hotel (2) – Skopje –** Best located hotel of the tour, steps from the main square of Skopje. Room was a good size with good beds and AC.

**Royal View Hotel (2) –** **Lake Ohrid –** Good location right on the lake front. Room was small but had a small balcony to sit on and watch the passing parade of people. Bed and AC were OK. AC turned off about 2 AM.

**Mimallones Hotel (2) –** **Lemos Village –** A quaint hotel with our room being very large and with an outside area with table and chair. Bathroom and beds were OK. But no AC was a bit of a letdown until the cool night air arrived.

**SPA Hotel (1) –** **Sandanski –** Actually the best beds of the whole trip. It was too bad for the late arrival and early departure for I could have spent more time in their beds.

**Ramada Trimontium Hote (1)l –** **Plovdiv –** A 4 star hotel on the way down to a 3 star or lower. Looked run down and with neglected maintenance. Rooms were OK with the hardest beds of the trip. Location was good right on the edge of the downtown and the Old Town area.

**Unknown name hotel –** **Koprivshtitsa –** This place reminded Yvonne of places she stayed in Bulgaria 28 years ago. It was a small room with a tiny bath and no AC. It was like a time warp for her. This was not a problem for us since we have stayed in places such as this around the world. And the cool night air was delightful. Good location for an easy walk to the festival on Saturday, where Yvonne stayed for the whole time.

**Overall rating –** A 4 on a scale of 1-5. Get rid of the Ramada it got the worst comments from other tour members.

1. **Bus –** Since we spent a lot of time on the bus it was comfortable but the AC sometimes had a hard time keeping the temperature comfortable. Having cool water for sale was a help and an emergency bathroom also a plus.
2. **Guides –** Only two main guides, Stephan and Boyan, for the city and site tours, with local guides at some sites. Stephan was very knowledgeable about most off the places we visited. He knew his Balkan history but was sometimes Bulgariancentric when talking about the other countries visited. He reminded me of a history professor that I had in college who pontificated a lot.Boyan had a friendly manner in his talks which contrasted with Stephan. He also was very knowable about what we saw. I feel that he also had a hidden agenda when he suggested helping us shop. He wanted to bring me to a shop of a friend that sold very expensive items that my wife would like and probably gave him a kickback. The local guides at most of the sites were fine.
3. **Sites -** The **Sofia** walking tour was very good. Stephan took us through the religious and political history of Sofia and Bulgaria ending at the church of Saint Sofia. And we still had time to see other sites, e.g. the Icon Museum. The afternoon visit to the national History Museum was also a highlight. I did not take Stephan’s tour since there were some exhibits that I wanted to see, especially one on the third floor.

**Vratsa –** Hristo Botev was one of the seminal figures in the Bulgarian Revolutionary movement along with Levski. So it was good to see one of the monuments to this legendary figure. And the town had an interesting clock tower.

**Montana –** Did not visit.

**Belogradchik –** Is a fascinating place to visit from a geological standpoint. These rocks play a large part in the development of the history of the formation of the earth.

**Vidin –** The all day visit was cut to a visit to only Baba Vida. This fortress has a long and interesting history and well worth the visit.

**Magura Cave –** Compared to other caves in France and Spain, the drawings in this cave are very primitive. Even though they were made later that those in these other countries. But it was an interesting visit to see the monochromic paintings.

**Felix Romuliana –** A place that I have never heard of. But one that was interesting to visit. The local guide did a very good job in describing the place and the history. I will do some research on my own on this site.

**Nish –** Only a lunch stop but a chance to see the center city area. And see the Nis fortress across the river from the city center. We did not get the short city tour.

**Skopje –** The walking tour of this city was a wonder. From the memorial house of Mother Teresa to the central plaza with all the statues to the old quarter to the mosque on the hilltop I saw things I never knew existed. I could have spent days exploring this place. And at night the center and riverside took on a lively ambiance with lights, people and music.

**Struga and the Drim River –** We never did see the river. The short dance show and our dance were enjoyable.

**Boat ride –** After leaving Struga we drove to Lake Ohrid and had a “surprise” boat trip on the lake that was scheduled for the next day. From the boat we could see the lake side church and the hill top fortress. This was followed by a walking tour of the old city and that lake side church.

**Bay of Bones Village –** I have read about prehistoric stilt villages but have never seen one so this visit was of great interest.

**Saint Naum Monastery –** This small but interesting monastery showed what monastic life was like. And the stories of Naum were fascinating to hear. And it set up the visit to Rila.

**Tushemisht –** Just a comfort stop at the villa of Enver Hoxha. But the park was quite nice with the small spring fed lake and the swans.

**Pogradets –** Not a great tour stop, but a chance to see everyday life in a smaller Albanian town. The walk through the lakeside park showed me what Albanians do, play a lot of dominoes is small huts.

**Korca –** A visit to larger Albanian city that gave us another chance to see Albanian life. And have time for lunch and shopping and a chance to have the local beer. There was more to see here but time did not permit. The surprise was the chance to go to the dance studio of and Albanian dance teacher for a dance lesson.

**Agios Achillios –** This was the island we visited with Yannis. Although of interest for the ruined churches, we spent way too much time here. The time could have been cut in half and leave time to see the other village, **Agios Germanos.**

**Psarades -** A small Greek village on Lake Prespes. A lunch stop with an optional boat ride on the lake. This was a nice stop to see a small village in Greece.

**Bitola –** A short walking tour of Bitola conducted by Stephan before having lunch. The tour was of interest but too short to see other places of interest in Bitola. Lunch was great to see the dancing and the various costumes. Too bad there was not a photo opportunity with these costumes. And we did not get a chance to dance Bitola Kolo on the main street.

**Samokov –** Did not stop here.

**Rila Monastery –** A jewel of a site. Tops of all the Monasteries in Bulgaria. Just to walk around the grounds, see the outside of the church and then the inside is what many come to Bulgaria for. Yvonne was taken back to the time 28 years ago when she first saw this amazing site.

**Plovdiv –** A good walking tour of the Old Town of Plovdiv to see the many houses, gates, churches, Roman amphitheater and Roman Circus. There is almost too many sites to see in just a few hour walking tour. The Ethnographic Museum deserved more time then we spent there. Although Stephan did a very good job in keeping us moving through the many rooms.

**Starosel –** **Thracian tomb –** Although it was a hike to see a Thanos, beehive tomb, was worth it. I have read about them but never thought that I would ever see one. Now I have and thank you for this stop.

**Koprivshtitsa –** A town known for two different reasons, Bulgarian revival archecture and the April Uprising. Stephan took us on a tour that covered both of these aspects. It was very interesting to see sites where the uprising took place and just to walk through the streets lined with such beautiful buildings.

**Koprivshtitsa Festival –** The reason Yvonne came on the trip. She sat for the complete program on Saturday and if there was a night session she would have been there also. It was a good mix of dance and song from both the young and old.

1. **Meals/Food –** For the most part the food was good and plentiful. But on the days where 3 meals were provided we could skip one and still feel satisfied. However some meals/food stood out.

**Shopska Salad –** We got some version of this at every meal. It is very good and healthy. But it looked as if every individual serving was for a table of four not for one.

**Meat Patty –** Served several times, a 6 inch diameter, ½ inch thick ground beef patty that sometimes was topped with cheese. More than one person could eat at one seating.

**Fish –** It was good to have the local fish on a few meals. It provided a break from the steady diet of meat. The lake trout was particularly good.

**Meals on our own –** This gave us a chance to try other local foods or look for something familiar. And, it gave us a chance to have smaller amounts of food to balance off the other meals

**Communal Meal Platters –** Most of too much meat on them. They had way too much meat on them. The one in Plovdiv was the most offensive of the ones we had. It had enough meat on them to feed a small village.

**Restaurants of note –** The Italian restaurant in Skopje, The restaurant outside Vrastsa, the lunch on the Danube ( but a hike for Yvonne), the two dance show restaurants in Bulgaria, and the one in Bitola.

1. **Travel –** To cover this amount of territory you need to spend a good amount of time on the bus. And we did. This was a cause of some negative comments from the tour members. They would have liked less bus time and more time for seeing sites or in doing more dancing particularly when long bus rides cancelled a workshop at a hotel.
2. **Border crossings –** When making a travel schedule that crosses a border extra time should be made for the two crossings, out of one and into the other. It usually takes more time than expected.
3. **ATM’s –** Since we were in countries that used different currencies the need for ATM’s is crucial, particularly in small cities or villages. The location of the ATM should be known and told to the tour participants.
4. **Tour Manager –** Ventsi did a good job during this tour. When something went wrong, he corrected the mistake as a good tour manager should. Some of these are the long walk to the restaurant in Struga. He brought the bus to the restaurant to not have the long walk back. When the “surprise” activity, the boat ride on Lake Ohrid was a day early, some did not take it. Ventsi offered to schedule another boat ride for the ones that missed it. None of them did. And finally getting taxi’s to take some of the tour members to and from a restaurant when walking would have been difficult. A good tour manager should learn from every tour how to make the next tour better.
5. **Workshops -** Pre-trip literature advertised 9 workshops. There were not that many conducted by Lee or Nicky. Late arrival at the hotels was one cause. Tour members commented about this lack of workshops.
6. **Teachers –** Since I was a novice on most of the dances taught by the two instructors, I watched their teaching methods to see what I could pick up and add to my teaching style. Lee and Nicky had different teaching styles. **Lee** assumed you have had some folk dancing experience. **Nicky** did not make this assumption. **Lee** started his teaching by playing a familiar dance or two, then went on to teach the new dance. **Nicky** started his teaching by calling out the name of the dance then counting the beat and/or rhythm. **Lee,** without music showed the steps of the dance at dance speed, calling out some steps but not all. **Nicky** had the dancers clap out the beat or rhythm before showing the dance steps at a slower than dance speed. **Lee** went through the dance 2-3 times then put on the music and repeated the dance more times. Since I was keying on **Lee** for the dance steps this was fine. **Nicky** continued to show the dance at faster speeds. And if he saw that the dancers were not getting the steps he went back to the start and did them again. **Lee,** after a few repetitions of the dance would sometimes go into turns, squats, spins and kicks that were not part of the dance steps but his personal style of leading a dance line. This required me to now follow another dancer that knew the steps. **Nicky** did not vary from the dance steps as he brought the guida player in to the lesson. Conclusion, of the two teachers, **Nicky’s** teaching style is more like mine and so I was able to get more out of his lessons than **Lee’s.**
7. **Comments by tour members – “**Not enough dancing. “ “Too much time on the bus.” “Too much food at most meals.” “Not enough free time for independent exploring, sopping or sitting in a café watching the local scene.” “Hotels started out great and ended not so great.” “Make some tours optional so others could have a dance session.” “I brought music to dance to but lee played only his own music.”
8. **Times we did dance –** Even with the missing workshops we did dance quite a few times. By my count we danced at least 17 times. And at very diverse locations; restaurants, lakeside promenade, border crossing, public plazas, an Albanian dance studio, etc. If we add in the missed workshops the count would have been well over 20 times.
9. **Greek Village Festival –** Created both good and negative comments. “It was magical.” The highlight of the entire trip.” Wish we could have stayed longer.” “It was too late for me to go to.” “Skip dinner and just go to the festival.” “After a long day, I was too tired to go.”
10. **Koprivshtitsa Festival -** Good but a little of a disappointment. It was a local festival so did not attract the crowds that were shown in your video. And there did not seem to be any public dancing after the performances were over. However, both Yvonne and I enjoyed seeing the variety of acts both dance and song and from a variety of ages from the very young to the very old. And we did sit through the entire festival on Saturday.
11. **Final Summary –** No tour is perfect, with highs and lows, hits and misses. Your tour was very ambitious in travel, scheduled sights, workshops, walking tours, meals and other items. Did it succeed? Yes. And I would recommend your tours to others interested in visiting places and dancing. And thanks for accommodating Yvonne I letting her do her thing on the tour. She came back telling me that she enjoyed the tour and did as much as she can now do.

Thank you for taking me to places I have nerve been, seeing things I have never saw and dancing in places I never thought I would.

George Schexnayder